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ABSTRACT

The accelerated schools process provides a systematic approach to the restructuring of schools. Developed in 1986 by Henry M. Levin, the strategy seeks to provide the best education for all students. During the first stage, the "taking stock" phase, everyone in the school community works together to develop a comprehensive school portrait while incorporating three principles--unity of purpose, empowerment coupled with responsibility, and building on strengths. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the behavioral patterns exhibited during the "taking-stock" process by first-year schools involved in the Louisiana Accelerated Schools Project between 1991 and 1993. Data were obtained from interviews with teachers and principals and observations from 14 first-year accelerated schools, both rural and urban, across Louisiana. Findings indicate that the schools began to build their capacity for educational change by experiencing at the "in-use" level the three principles of unity of purpose, empowerment with responsibility, and building on strengths. First, in every school there was total agreement that both training in the quarterly statewide meetings and the school-site committees were conducive to building on strengths. Second, the integration of students' unique talents emerged with interdisciplinary approaches. Finally, the schools established a sense of community and began to integrate the Inquiry Process into the everyday life of the classrooms. All three principles must be interwoven to create active learning environments for at-risk students. One table is included. (Contains 16 references.) (LMI)

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# BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

# FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

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## BUILDING ON STRENGTHS FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

### OBJECTIVES

Research today indicates that schools are becoming involved in restructuring in order to make changes in all aspects of education. Murphy (1991) states that, "One of the key ingredients of school restructuring is a redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of [the] professional staff" (p. 22). Schools begin to exhibit evidence of restructuring when, as David (1989) purports, there is

> ...a major shift in how people in school systems think about roles and relationships. The shift is from a system characterized by controlling and directing what goes on at the next lower level to guiding and facilitating professionals in their quest for more productive learning opportunities for students. (p. 28)

On more practical terms, schools in the process of restructuring, place more emphasis on interdependence and cooperative work teams thus providing the opportunities for teachers and administrators to confront a variety of problems by building on each other's strengths (Clark & Meloy, 1989). As Maeroff (1993) indicates, schooling might be improved by the "...formation of a nucleus of committed people in each school, people prepared to take risks inside and outside their own classrooms" (p. 512).

The accelerated schools process provides a systematic approach to the restructuring of schools. Developed in 1986 by Henry M. Levin, Professor of Economics and Education at Stanford University, this strategy has the overall purpose of creating the best schools

for all children so that every child has the opportunity to succeed as a creative, critical, and productive member of our society. The Accelerated Schools Project differs from other school reform interventions because it provides a process for the members of the school community to become more aware of their existing school culture and to make the changes they desire in the school culture.

The accelerated schools model does seem to be providing the path for principals, central office administrators, and teachers to work as leaders by utilizing collaborative efforts to energize, focus, and empower the entire school community. The results from this empowerment create the scaffolding of a unified culture for successful learning experiences.

The journey in the process of this transformation is exciting because of the powerful ideas generated by the school community. The quest for educational change begins with the "taking stock" phase of the Accelerated Schools Project (Levin, 1991). It is during this phase that everyone in the school community works together to explore all facets of the school in order to provide a comprehensive portrait of the school while incorporating the three principles: Unity of purpose among all staff, parents, students, and the local community; empowerment coupled with responsibility for shared decision-making; and building on strengths of students, staff, parents, and community through the use of a gifted and talented pedagogy and moving toward development of a unified vision (Levin, 1992).

The initial phase of a restructuring process involves teachers and principals discovering that their relationships with one another become central to building on strengths. The nucleus of this study deals specifically on how teachers and school administrators came to understand the meaning of the concept of building on strengths.

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the recurring behavioral patterns exhibited during the "taking stock process" by first year schools involved in the Louisiana Accelerated Schools Project between the years 1991 and 1993. Focusing on these patterns contributes to how school communities build on strengths for educational change. While conveying vivid descriptions of schools in the initial phase of an educational metamorphosis, this paper provides information about the feelings and experiences of principals and teachers in their struggles and successes to change from a traditional learning environment to an accelerated one.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Levin (1992) argues that in the quest for educational change, attention must be given to building the capacity for embracing the three guiding principles of accelerated schools (unity of purpose, empowerment with responsibility, and building on strengths). This study focuses on the principle of building on strengths. As stated in The Accelerated Schools Resource Guide (1993), "The third principle, building on strengths, refers to sharing and utilizing all of the human resources that students, parents, school staff,

districts, and local communities bring to the educational endeavor" (p. 26).

Key to developing the capacity for school site change that impact the learning environment involves "espousing" and practicing the principles at an "in-use" level. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) purport that organizational, social, as well as individual change may come about when people espouse certain values and practice them at an "in-use" level. The espoused theory refers to what an individual claims he or she would do in certain situations. The theory "in-use" refers to those actions or behaviors actually taken in those situations. St. John, Allen-Haynes, Davidson, and Meza (1992) conclude from observations and research on the implementation of accelerated schools that the three principles "...need to be experienced at the 'in-use' level [in order] for the accelerated schools process to take hold in a school" (p. 64). Crucial in this study is the evidence that first year schools develop the capacity for school site organizational and curriculum change by "espousing" and implementing the three principles of accelerated schools at an "in-use" level.

As school community members become empowered to reflect and question traditional ways through the taking stock process, they ultimately are freely choosing to utilize untapped learning resources. This study will show evidence that the first year schools created the capacity to build on the strengths of their staffs, students, parents, and communities.

Reflection may be necessary for the teachers to engage in dialogue in which they can make free and informed choices on how to build on the strengths of others. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) describes a situation in which there is opportunity for free and informed choices and public testing of ideas as an "unfreezing" process. Through reflection, the school members begin to publicly test their ideas and opinions. Argyris, Putnam, and Smith contend that members of systems can use reflection to: First begin to "unfreeze," to communicate honestly and openly; second, to reflect on their own lives and world; and third, to begin to learn how to create changes that are "...more congruent with the values and theories they espouse" (p. 98).

During reflection, teachers might be able to develop the capacity for building on strengths by creating situations for this "unfreezing" process to occur. In these situations teachers may be able to look inside themselves to reflect on their attitudes and values that have constrained them from recognizing the strengths of others as well as their own.

Therefore, teachers begin to take action or practice at an "in-use" level the values for developing the capacity to build on strengths. According to Schon (1983) through reflection, one gets a feeling for a situation which leads him or her to a particular course of action. Perhaps through a phase of reflection, teachers will be enabled to discuss those issues that were once not confrontable--issues that were pent up because of the lack of trust and open and honest dialogue and communication. Argyris and Schon

(1974) contend that by bringing tensions to the surface, dysfunctional groups become groups where utilization of building on strengths provides educational change.

## METHODS AND DATA SOURCE

The methodology to gather data on capacity building for the study included interviews and observations from 14 first year accelerated schools, both rural and urban, across the state of Louisiana. These schools were primarily comprised of at-risk students. Eight schools began the accelerated schools process during the 1991-1992 school year; six schools initiated the process in the 1992-1993 school year.

The qualitative research, that included the interviews and observations, were conducted by the Accelerated Schools Project team members from the University of New Orleans. The interviews of teachers and principals focused on the taking stock process. It is during this phase of the Accelerated Schools Project that everyone in the school community works together to explore all facets of the school in order to provide a comprehensive portrait of the school while incorporating the three principles and moving toward development of a unified vision.

According to Lightfoot (1983) the concept of the portrait in qualitative research can provide new insights and understandings into the educational setting. Lightfoot's focus is to pursue perspectives and themes that are not pre-determined but that emerge from the social context itself.

The piecing together of the portrait has the elements of building a puzzle or weaving a quilt. The pieces of the story collected from observations and interviews must also be woven together. Lightfoot (1983) explains how this weaving or piecing is likened to the researcher using all of the senses to decipher and understand the data collected. This paper provides a portrait of 14 schools involved in building the capacity for changing the traditional learning environment to an accelerated one. Each school was viewed through the lenses of the portraiture to determine if the school was operating at the "espoused" or "in-use" level.

**FINDINGS**

As the researchers began to analyze the data, the pieces of the phenomena were woven together. Through the principle of building on strengths, each individual in an accelerated school brings something different to the school; such as talents, skills, insights, organizational intelligence, interests, artistic expression, and resources. These attributes create a new learning environment based on the whole rather than on the parts. As the roles and responsibilities of the school community members changed, they became empowered to reflect and question traditional ways through the taking stock process. The result is that the members ultimately began to freely choose to utilize untapped learning resources.

Moore-Johnson (1989) state that as teachers take on expanded responsibilities, two types of changes occur, "...those that

increase teachers' right to participate in formal decision making [and] those that give teachers greater access to influence by making school structures more flexible" (p. 29). This section will show evidence that the first year schools were building on the strengths of their staffs, students, parents, and communities as their roles and responsibilities took on new meaning.

School Staff Sharing through Networking

In every school there was total agreement that both training in the quarterly statewide meetings and the school-site committees formed during the taking stock process were conducive to building strengths. The reason most often given was the sharing of ideas by networking with colleagues. In the case of the quarterly meetings, teachers and principals not only had the opportunities to observe other schools, students, and staffs, but also to ask questions concerning innovative projects, problems, and teaching strategies. As school staffs become empowered to be decision makers and change agents, they experienced opportunities to return to their own schools to test new behaviors and actions. Levin (1991) wrote:

> Teachers bring the gifts of insight, intuition, and teaching and organizational intelligence. These abilities are largely ignored and wasted in schools that exclude teachers from the decisions they ultimately must implement. P. 14

At one school in a rural area of Louisiana, a teacher, in her committee for staff development, used her creative and technical skills to list the special talents and interests of the staff to

help the staff build on their strengths. The three pages had graphics made on a computer to depict these interests and talents. Under each graphic were the names of the teachers who expressed that particular interest or talent. The strengths of the staff were utilized when forming their visions. All interviewees expressed the collaboration and cooperation that went into writing the vision. When asking a teacher about the vision forming process, she had this to relate, "We planted the seed." She continued to explain how each one contributed to watching the seed grow and branch out.

All teachers and principals expressed the need for everyone to attend the quarterly statewide meetings for the sharing and interaction, internalization of principles, and understanding of the process. One principal particularly mentioned the summer training as a key for sharing with the staff when she said:

> The ones that went to [the summer training] really benefitted. It just seemed that the ones who went through summer training seemed to be more on board. It was also great to interact with different schools.

Integrating Students' Unique Talents and Gifts with Interdisciplinary Approaches

Teachers overwhelmingly expressed that to build on the strengths of students and move away from utilizing the text as the only teaching tool was crucial. One teacher seemed to say it all, "Accelerated schools and hands-on teaching go hand in hand." It was apparent in all interviews that teachers were beginning to use

the talents, special skills and interests of the students as an approach to make learning fun and motivating. Levin (1991) explained:

> The strengths of at-risk students are often overlooked because these students are perceived as lacking the learning behaviors associated with middle-class students rather than being seen as having unique and different assets which can be used to accelerate their learning. P. 14

Teachers and principals related that the quarterly statewide meetings provided excellent opportunities for school staffs to view models of learning situations in which children were engaged in activities that developed their natural talents and gifts. As a result of these meetings, teachers went back and shared with others the projects, innovative teaching, and strategies they had witnessed. It was apparent that teachers had implemented many gifted and talented approaches in their schools to motivate the children and encourage them to find learning more meaningful. Evidence also indicated that students were becoming more active and interactive with their teachers, peers, parents, and community at school and at home. Brunner and Hopfenberg (1992) state:

> Accelerated schools create powerful learning situations that motivate students to grow and succeed. In accelerated schools, students see meaning in their lessons and perceive connections between-school life

and real life. They learn actively and in ways that build on their own strengths. P. 5

Many examples of teachers building on the strengths of themselves and students came alive during the interviews. Two examples have been selected to portray the powerful learning that came from building on strengths.

A fourth-grade teacher who had gone to the summer training was very excited to relate the importance of looking for strengths in the taking stock process.

> You learn what teachers have. Some are competent in music and art. Some have hidden talents that you don't know about. You learn what teachers tend to be more creative than others.

She continued to say how this creativity can be passed on to the students because of empowerment from the school board when she stated, "The school board has given us more liberty to go in a classroom and do some of these more creative things that we were not able to do in the past because of time lines." This same teacher explained how much the children enjoyed a creative project at Thanksgiving. The teacher used an interdisciplinary approach to integrate the students' artistic talents and research skills.

> We were studying about the Pilgrims in Social Studies. We extended that study and researched the topic of Thanksgiving in the library. They made costumes and dressed like little Pilgrims and Indians.

Schools in their first year were finding ways to reach at-risk

children from multi-ethnic backgrounds. Previously looked upon as problems for the staff, multi-ethnic backgrounds now were viewed as opportunities for alternative and stimulating learning experiences. These learning experiences were links between languages and cultures. Art and creative writing became the interdisciplinary approach used by a veteran fifth-grade teacher to reach the students in her class with a wide range of ethnic backgrounds--Spanish, African-American, Vietnamese, Anglo-Saxon. Research has found that art provides a break in the language barrier for children who are hesitant, or find it difficult, to express themselves using the traditional form of language to communicate. The teacher explained that many children were not good textbook readers but they have a lot of knowledge about other things, such as farms where many live. She has them draw pictures of their experiences at home. She gets the children to help her to do the lesson plans on various topics of their interest. At the time of the interviews, the class was involved in the process of making a big book on weather. The fifth graders form into cooperative learning teams. One team does the writing, another does the illustrating, and still another thinks of how the booklets can be presented to the first and second graders for peer tutoring and sharing. The teacher expressed:

> The more they do it, the more embedded it is in their minds and the skill becomes their own so they can teach it to someone else in their own way.

The teacher also referred to the fact that the students get

help from the librarian as they do research on the topic. She said, "I found out that these children are very creative. All of them can't read very well, but they are definitely creative." Children who were encouraged to talk and interact with each other become the creators.

The fifth-grade teacher's last comment exemplified that the building on strengths principle can create environments of powerful learning:

> My children are finding out that they are the creators. They can create just about anything they want. I have many children that are great artists....These children are talented....

According to Brunner and Hopfenberg (1992):

> Our conception of powerful learning is based on the premise that the education we use with "gifted" children works well for all children. With this fact in mind, we must create situations where every school day encompasses the best things we know about learning. P. 15

Evidence from all the interviewees clearly indicated that the diversified interdisciplinary, hands-on approaches were being matched to students' strengths since the first-year schools have initiated the taking stock process.

Developing a Sense of Community

Parents and communities began to be viewed as assets for the school. Teachers and principals were incorporating resources from

industries, retail businesses, and clinics, as well as the talents and skills from parents and grandparents.

In most cases it was disclosed that the task of involving parents and communities was a difficult one. However, as the schools received greater publicity through vision celebrations, more people were able to actually see and hear what the Accelerated Schools Project had to offer. As one teacher noted, "Sometimes it is a matter of just making a concerted effort to involve parents."

A teacher with several Asian-American children in the class was having a special program. She wrote individual invitations, made personal calls, begged and pleaded with the children to ask parents or any other adults in their families to come. She said:

> Since then these people feel more at ease--they come in to talk to me. They are very supportive. If I ask for materials for a project, they will go out of their way to see to it that I get these things.

In every school one of the major challenges was to continue to involve parents and the community. In half of the schools this involvement and participation was growing into a sense of real community spirit for the accelerated schools.

In summarizing the principle of building on strengths, the research found that the first-year teachers and principals have built upon cultural diversities within their school environments and communities to enrich and enhance the learning situations for students. Empowered staffs have taken the risks to experiment, share, and learn from each other. These lessons learned through

the taking stock process have not only increased the positive attitudes of teachers, principals and students, but have elevated the morale of the total school community.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Results of the study suggest that the first-year accelerated schools in the Louisiana network have begun to build the capacity for educational change by experiencing at the "in-use" level the three principals of unity of purpose, empowerment with responsibility, and building on strengths.

An interaction among the three principles and the innovative projects of teachers, parents, and students was observed in the first-year schools. Brunner and Hopfenberg (1992) also observed this interaction and growth pattern after five years of collaboratively working with the Accelerated Schools Project.

This interaction occurs between what has been entitled "Big Wheels" and "Little Wheels." Brunner and Hopfenberg have noticed that the interaction between "Big Wheels" and "Little Wheels" move schools toward transformation. The "Big Wheels" include the formal philosophy and process which encompass the three principles. The "Little Wheels" are the innovations of the school community groups (parents, teachers, students, etc.). Both of these wheels turn to bring the school closer to its vision. This pattern of interaction between "Big Wheels" and "Little Wheels" is apparent in the UNO research. In every school the accelerated schools' taking stock process has had an influential impact on creating an educational change.

## CONCLUSIONS

Schools engaged in the taking stock process during the years 1992 and 1993 were found to have many similar behavior patterns. These patterns emerged as a result of schools espousing and practicing at an "in-use" level the three principles of the Accelerated Schools Project. A summary of patterns observed in 1992 and 1993 first year schools is presented below.

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As school members began to unite in shared decision making, they realized building on their individualized strengths would open windows for creativity and innovations. Visible symbols that schools were building on their strengths were observed through the special events occurring in classrooms and around the schools. Parades for vision celebrations were the signs that schools had embraced the process. These celebrations and social events linked the school as an organization and the school as a community of learners and teachers. The interweaving of the three principles and the innovative experiments with the curriculum and instructional processes brought the learning environment alive. Chenoweth and Kushman (1993) suggest that the accelerated schools model "...is a model which truly attempts to transform a school through an interweaving of both school process and school content changes" (p. 7).

Networking at quarterly statewide meetings was a perfect channel for sharing ideas such as hands-on learning approaches, cooperative learning, thematic and whole language philosophies of teaching, and integrated arts and interdisciplinary approaches to build on teachers' and students' strengths. Interviewees focused on the importance of linking together the concepts of the accelerated schools process with hands-on approaches. This linking has led to teaching methods that involved students on a more interactive basis. Positive self-esteem in students was the consequence of the linking.

School communities realized that the more deeply involved they got in the process, the more extensively they were able to understand and apply the building on strengths principle. Challenges such as multi-ethnic school populations, single-parent families, discipline problems, and low-achieving at-risk students were viewed as opportunities to use alternative methods, programs, and creative thinking by building on strengths.

The schools indicated that one of the positive aspects of building on strengths was the beginning of building school communities of inquiry. The inquiry process which follows the taking stock process further developed their sense of community. Schools in the first year of the process have only begun to be introduced to the Inquiry Process. Therefore, there is not yet sufficient evidence of the results using the Inquiry Process or building communities of inquiry. However, they have formed cadres

to initiate the inquiry process to create significant school changes for the coming year.

Attempting to "see" how schools in 1992 and in 1993 have espoused and practiced the three principles at the "in-use" level during the taking stock process is an asset for school communities, universities as accelerated schools satellite centers, and researchers who desire to influence the lives of students, particularly at-risk students. The "seeing" provided an understanding of what happens during the taking stock process. Eisner (1991) says: "Seeing, rather than mere looking, requires an enlightened eye; this is as true and as important in understanding and improving education as in creating a painting" (p. 1).

Conceptualizing the taking stock process in patterns was conducive to holistically viewing how school members built the capacity for educational change. By focusing holistically, schools were enabled to "see" how all three principles must be interwoven together to create exciting, active learning environments for at-risk students to accelerate.

Results of the study suggest that the first year accelerated schools in the Louisiana network have begun to build the capacity for educational change by experiencing at the "in-use" level the three principals of unity of purpose, empowerment with responsibility, and building on strengths.

Evidence of recurring behaviors indicate that when a school community begins the "unfreezing" process and builds on the

strengths of its members at an "in-use" level, the following patterns emerged:

First, in every school there was total agreement that both training in the quarterly statewide meetings and the school site committees formed during the taking stock process were conducive to building on strengths.

Second, the integration of students' unique talents and gifts emerged with interdisciplinary approaches.

Third, a sense of community was established.

Fourth, the Inquiry Process began to be woven into the everyday life of the classrooms.

## EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Understanding the recurring behavioral patterns enhances the educational researcher and the school community to view and recognize dilemmas and issues to build the capacity for educational change. Faculties that operate at an "in-use" level rather than an "espoused" one are able to create a path for changing the traditional school into an accelerated one. As a result, school members are enabled to create a school with exciting, interactive learning environments for all students, especially at-risks students.

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**TABLE 1**

**Building on Strengths**

| 1992 | 1993 |
|---|---|
| Celebrations--Hosting Network Meetings | School Staff Sharing through Networking |
| Celebrating Accelerated Schools and Special Events | Integrating Students' Unique Talents and Gifts with Interdisciplinary Approaches |
| Realizing Hidden Strengths | Building a Sense of Community |
| Building Communities of Inquiry | Not applicable here |